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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: USCIRF MEETING WITH CARDINAL POUPARD ON
CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE

REF: (a) vatican 156, (b) Vatican 067, (c) Vatican 021

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EXEC, State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary. Bishop Ramirez of the USCIRF discussed Christian-Muslim dialogue with Cardinal Poupard on July 13. Poupard noted the impossibility of doctrinal dialogue with Islam, and the corresponding need to root that essential dialogue instead in the ground of culture. Poupard focused on the need for dialogue to be concrete, specific, and local rather than abstract or general; and for the dialogue to involve "real" Muslims on the field of ideas, and to emphasize reciprocity. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) called on Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, on July 13. Ramirez was accompanied by charge d'affaires and by Scott Flipse, USCIRF advisor. Ramirez described the nature of CIRF and the purpose of his visit (see ref a), and asked Poupard about Christian-Muslim dialogue.

[¶3.](#) (C) Poupard said that Pope Benedict XVI had asked him to head the dicasteries of both Culture and Inter-Religious Dialogue, and they had a long discussion at the time. It appeared, said Poupard, impossible to have a genuine doctrinal dialogue with Islam; it would be blasphemy for Muslims to talk of Jesus as God. Nevertheless, it is important to carry out dialogue with the diverse world of Islam, and the pope considered the rubric of culture to be the appropriate field for this dialogue. According to Poupard, dialogue with Islam must emphasize "reciprocity" (not precisely defined, but in Vatican usage often meaning greater openness on the part of Muslim countries to Christian worship; must build on the terrain of ideas and philosophy (perhaps via universities) and mutual respect; must be specific and concrete, relating to actual issues and avoiding abstractions; must be with "real" Muslims (not powerless or marginal figures); and must focus on the local and particular. For example, Poupard praised a recent Brussels conference on ecology and environment at which he felt good contacts had been made with Muslims.

[¶4.](#) (sbu) Expanding a bit on reciprocity, Poupard said that his theme for 20 years had been that true dialogue is only possible between free partners. "We are all children of our culture, especially in Europe" he said; we have a common Greco-Roman heritage, and a heritage of Christian faith and respect for (any) religion. Muslims have their respective heritage. Only by acknowledging real similarities and differences at the outset could a genuine and sincere dialogue proceed.

¶5. (C) Asked what he would recommend to the USCIRF, Poupard again emphasized a focus on the concrete and realistic. Don't, he urged, accept vague declarations such as "Islam is the most tolerant faith in the world". Those who wish to enter Europe should respect it; religious conversion must be possible for all. Poupard pressed the USCIRF to "tell Turkey to respect conditions for entry", complaining of an existing climate there of hate and suspicion toward Catholics. Poupard said that the French Bishops Conference had written to Jacques Chirac with their concerns about Turkey but had received no reply -- which he found shocking.

Comment

¶6. (C) Poupard, elegant and precise, was gracious with Ramirez but did not mince words with regard to Islam, and Turkey in particular. While it is thought that he will retire soon (he is 75 now), his sharp views clearly symbolize a shift in emphasis from those of Archbishop Fitzgerald, the former head of Interreligious Dialogue, now in Cairo (see refs b and c).

SANDROLINI